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ABSTRACT

Poor writing among students is not necessarily a function of poor learning, but rather may be a function of poor teaching, and poor writing instruction will continue as long as English remains an undisciplined profession. Examples of the profession's lack of discipline include curricula devised by individual teachers, part-time teachers unqualified to teach writing, and discrepancies in writing techniques from one teacher to another. The preparation for English teachers at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, presents one way to achieve the needed discipline within the faculty. This method consists of three phases: course design and planning, teacher preparation, and teacher sustainment. At the end of each academic year, faculty members list by preference their three choices for summer assignments, among which are course planning committees. They then work with the directors of the two cadet writing courses to assess, design, and plan the course for the upcoming academic year. One week prior to the start of fall classes, the instructors meet to "calibrate" criteria for evaluating and grading papers and methods for conducting classes. For teacher sustainment, the course director meets in conference with the instructors during each semester to discuss problems and their solutions, recalibrate, and reaffirm the integrity of the course. Tenured faculty members also visit classes, especially those of new instructors, and discuss what they may do to improve their teaching, or reaffirm the more effective techniques observed. This faculty participation in assessment, designing, and planning of the writing program is the first step toward discipline in the profession. The second step is acquiring an attitude and code of conduct: faculty must be committed and loyal to the approved program and to teaching within its guidelines. (HTH)

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Disciplined Pedagogy: Efficacy of West Point's Writing Program

A Speech for the CCCC Convention, New Orleans
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I teach an elective course entitled English Expression Workshop. It, too, is a writing course and students come into it with writing problems common to most college students, and they emerge better writers. We have what we consider a successful writing program, and I attribute much of the success of the program to the disciplined pedagogy that inheres in the Department, the subject of my presentation this afternoon.

Before I begin to discuss our pedagogical method, let me set forth two propositions. The first proposition underlies my entire philosophy about teaching, which is, poor writing among students is not necessarily a function of poor learning; rather, it may be a function of poor teaching. My second proposition I see as a systemic problem, and that is, we will continue to have poor writing instruction as long as we remain an undisciplined profession. And before you accuse me of begging the question in the second proposition that characterizes us as an undisciplined profession, allow me to defend myself.

I am going to cite some instances of what I see as possible problems of discipline among us. At one college in Virginia, all teachers of freshmen composition design their own course, choose their own texts, and do just about whatever they want to do. At a community college in New Jersey, a composition workgroup has designed two composition courses that are supposed to emphasize process, with audience and purpose as points of emphasis; and yet part-timers teach half of their composition sections, for whom no mechanism or plan exists for preparing them to teach or understand the concept of the course. Moreover, in an exit exam from these courses, mandated by the state, students must write at least a four-paragraph essay. Is this requirement not imposing a structure, a form, in what is supposed to be a composition course emphasizing process? At an institution in Michigan the writing program is not administered by the English Department because school officials decided that in order to serve the students'

best interests, the program would fare better outside the jurisdiction of the English Department (Robinson 482). At a college in Mississippi students learn to write sentences first, then paragraphs, and then a "unified" essay--learn the form first, and then maybe you'll be able to think of something interesting and thought-provoking to write about. Now these instances may not indicate problems, but rather efforts to address institutional needs. Let us look at what I think are the serious problems of discipline.

Sometimes in the same school students take composition courses diametrically opposed to each other. In one class the teacher is encouraging free thinking and is trying to activate some psychological mechanism within his or her students that will enable them to make writing, reading, thinking, listening, speaking, and studying a circle of connected activities. In another class the teacher is imposing form, insisting on correctness while inhibiting free and creative and critical thinking. In one composition course a student will learn that the thesis statement must appear near the end of the first paragraph in the five-paragraph essay. Then that same student will take another composition course at the same school, and the teacher will tell that student not to write beginnings (introductions they say) with the perfunctory thesis statement near the end of the first paragraph. No wonder our students are confused and come into the job market unable to write and fearful of writing (Wheeler 1). Some of us are also confused about what we should teach and how we should teach what we ought to be teaching but don't know what we ought to be teaching. We are not as disciplined as we ought to be. We are not practicing a disciplined pedagogy in all our colleges and universities.

What do I mean by a disciplined pedagogy? We who are faculty members at West Point are professional military men and women dedicated to the art of teaching and preparing our cadets to become officers in the Regular Army of the United States. We teach the usual courses for four-year colleges, but we also

teach discipline. And by discipline I do not mean simply a code of conduct and an attitude of obedience, though indeed they are part, a very important part, of military professionalism. I don't want you to think that I am suggesting that we militarize the teaching profession, though in some instances that may not be too alien an idea. Nor do I want you to think that I am speaking from the single perspective of the military, for I consider myself a denizen of two cultures: civilian and military. Since I began teaching in 1970, I have taught about eight years at civilian institutions and about three years at West Point. From 1974 to 1980 I served as a Department Head at Jackson State University, have taught part-time at a four-year college in Oklahoma, and even now I, along with Pat, teach part-time at a community college in New Jersey. I am therefore familiar with teaching in both civilian and military environments, and can say, based on my experience, that we have little or no disciplined pedagogy in the civilian institutions where I have worked.

What, I ask again, do I mean by a disciplined pedagogy? Let me describe for you what I consider to be a disciplined pedagogy by way of describing what we do at West Point in order to prepare our teachers for the classroom. I am not saying this is the way, but a way to achieve discipline within the faculty. Our method exists in three phases: course design and planning; teacher preparation; and teacher sustainment. Each of these phases cohere in the teaching philosophy and teacher preparation for the four core courses--those courses that all cadets must take while enrolled in the Academy.

Near the end of each academic year, course directors will have already selected and ordered texts for the upcoming year, and our chief administrative officer in the Department, at the direction of the Deputy Department Head, or "not-head" as we affectionately call him, asks faculty members to list by preference their three choices for summer assignments, among which are course planning committees. The Deputy Head then reviews these lists and makes

assignments so that Pat and John, who direct the two writing courses that are part of every cadet's curriculum, get each a committee of officers with whom they assess, design, and plan the course for the upcoming academic year. During weeks of arguing, discussing, and disagreeing, these committees design and plan their courses. They prepare complete syllabi that include the course objectives, standards for evaluating written work, the topical design for a forty-lesson course, and all writing assignments; in short, they pre-teach the course. These activities allow the Department Head, Deputy Head, course directors and committees to visualize the total course. I am not saying that such course designs are inflexible, but, as Lindemann has so rightly pointed out, the real value of such an exercise lies not in its execution but in its planning, though we would like very much to be able to execute our plan (Rhetoric 251). Therefore, when the faculty assembles for the fall semester, course directors and their committees are ready to present the courses to their respective faculties. And as a postscript, every faculty member in the Department teaches at least one section of freshmen composition.

When we assemble in the fall semester, one week prior to the start of classes (new instructors assemble two weeks prior to the start of classes), we conduct what I consider to be the most important phase of our pedagogical disciplining, which is the preparation of our teachers for the classroom. We have named this exercise calibration, a term we use in the military for fine-tuning equipment and instruments for precision. We calibrate in two ways: first, in evaluating and grading papers, and secondly, in conducting classes.

The course director selects papers from previous courses for the Department Head, Deputy Head, tenured faculty members and one or two third-year non-tenured faculty members to read, discuss, evaluate, and grade in order to choose papers for the entire faculty for the purpose of calibration. This pre-calibration session allows the tenured faculty to calibrate themselves and to establish

standards for evaluating and grading papers, we have three standards for grading papers, and in descending order they are substance, organization, and correctness. We are concerned with how students' papers reflect clarity, thoughtfulness, purpose, originality, clear thinking, personality, and correctness. We, the tenured faculty, decide on the grades these papers should receive, and even we have some divergence in our evaluation and grading. The point of the exercise, however, is that we do come to some consensus on what is quality writing and what is not. After pre-calibration, the course director, in a three-or four-day period, totaling about twenty hours, leads the entire faculty in a series of calibration exercises in evaluating and grading papers, in fine-tuning our application of standards in the evaluation of student writing. We emphasize to faculty members that in evaluating and grading essays, we seek to recognize and bring to the students' attention patterns that contribute to quality writing as well as patterns that pose problems. Moreover, we make specific recommendations to students on how to fix or correct problems and thereby improve their writing. A valuable activity during calibration is the preparation of cover-sheet comments that tell the students what they are doing well and what they are not doing so well, and recommend specific ways that may improve their writing.

The other part of our calibration deals with preparing our teachers for the classroom, especially our new instructors. Our situation is a particularly unusual one because we experience a thirty percent turnover rate each year with our faculty. Of 47 faculty members in our department, only seven are tenured. The others are on a three-year assignment, and so we have about 15 new faculty members each year. We seek to inculcate the notion that writing and the teaching of writing involve a circle of connected activities: writing, thinking, reading, speaking, listening, and studying. Students learn to write by writing and re-writing, and teachers must not simply tell students how to write but also show them, which means that our teachers write their own

responses to the writing assignments. We use collaborative learning and workshop techniques in the classroom, and during calibration we talk about techniques that help students become better writers. In effect, we shift back and forth from student to teacher, as we learn from our colleagues and they from us. In some instances we have divided ourselves into groups in order to simulate the collaborative learning process.

The third phase in our disciplined pedagogy is teacher sustainment. During the course of each semester, the course director schedules conferences, which are general meetings in which we discuss problems and their solutions, recalibrate, and reaffirm the integrity of the course. Further, tenured faculty members visit classes, especially those of new instructors, and afterwards talk with instructors on what they may do in order to become better teachers or, what is usually the case, reaffirm some of the more effective techniques observed. These regularly scheduled conferences and classroom visitations are valuable in sustaining the high quality of instruction the program and Department demand.

Now I am ready to answer the question I have already posed twice: what is a disciplined pedagogy? Writing instruction is one of the most critical disciplines in education today, and there is therefore no place for academic license, a degeneration of the basic tenet of academic freedom. When we teach our electives, we can be as free as we want, but in teaching writing, a school or university has to evaluate its needs and design a writing program to address those needs, and we have done these at West Point. The faculty needs to be part of the assessment, design, and planning of the writing program. This is the first step toward discipline, and many institutions have these approved programs already in place.

The second step is less a step and more an attitude and code of conduct, and this step is the heart of my notion of discipline. Faculty members must be committed and loyal to the approved program, that is, faculty members must teach

within the approved course and not simply give it lip service. The scheme for designing and planning the course must allow for faculty members to provide their input. An approved writing program is much like a corporate board reaching a decision and then executing it. Board members have the opportunity to express their views on the matter at hand, but once the board has reached a decision, then board members provide their maximum support, or else they do not remain board members very long. The same process obtains in the military. We should apply this same standard of conduct to the way we teach writing. Teach within the frame of the approved course, and through the process of evaluating, designing, and planning the course, seek change, but change only for improving student writing.

In a disciplined pedagogy for writing instruction, we must also have a procedure for standardizing criteria for grading and attuning faculty to those standards. At West Point our calibration sessions serve these purposes. In our pedagogy we must also provide a plan for preparing new teachers for the classroom. I firmly believe that to a large extent poor writing among students does result more from poor teaching than from poor learning. If we don't do something to improve our teachers of writing, then we shall protract the already grave problem of students who not only are unable to write but are also fearful of writing. Pedagogy is the art and profession of teaching. Implicit in both terms, art and profession, is discipline. Let us be disciplined in our art and profession of teaching.

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